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ABSTRACT

A study tested the effectiveness of ridicule as an educational and social corrective in children's educational television programs. Arbitrary activities involving a novel object were presented to 69 four-year-old and 83 six-year-old children via videotaped presentations and demonstrations. In each of three types of motivational message (ridicule, command, suggestion), a highly specific action was discouraged, another was encouraged, and a third was unmotivated. Subject gender was employed as an additional factor. The frequency with which subjects played with the novel object as discouraged, encouraged, and unmotivated was assessed. Four-year-old children consistently responded most effectively to correction when commands were given. In contrast, six-year-old children were most responsive to ridicule, followed by suggestion. (Author/RL)

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The Effect of Ridiculing a Model on Children's Imitation of Televised Instruction

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Abstract

In order to test the effectiveness of ridicule as an educational and social corrective in children's educational television programs, arbitrary activities involving a novel object were presented to 4- and 6-year olds via videotaped presentations and demonstrations. In each of three conditions of type of motivational message (ridicule, command, suggestion), a highly specific action was discouraged, another was encouraged, and a third was unmotivated. Subject gender was employed as an additional factor. The frequency with which subjects played with the novel object as discouraged, encouraged, and unmotivated was assessed. Four-year olds consistently responded most effectively to correction when commands were given. In contrast, 6-year olds were most responsive to ridicule, followed by suggestion.

The Effect of Ridiculing a Model on

Children's Imitation of Televised Instruction

In a classic Sesame Street segment, Kermit the Frog is severely ridiculed after standing out in the snow for a long time attempting to locate a potential interviewee who purportedly "has been standing out in the snow for a long time." Or, Ernie's raucous laughter and light-hearted insults belittle Bert when he fails to put away a basketball and, instead, takes the ball to bed like a familiar teddy bear. Bill Cosby introduces a "picture page" on Captain Kangaroo by inducing his youthful audience to follow instructions carefully so "other kids won't laugh at you and say you're silly." As these and numerous other readily-available examples illustrate, ridicule is a pervasive form of instructional motivation in television programs directed toward preschool children. A recent content analysis of humor in children's educational television found that an average of 13 incidents of ridicule occur per 30 minute portion of Sesame Street, Electric Company, and Captain Kangaroo combined (Bryant, Hezel, & Zillmann, 1979).

There are obvious reasons why educators and producers have chosen to so frequently employ ridicule in children's televised instruction. Ridicule is an obtrusive form of humor, and young children are clearly attracted to at least certain forms of televised humor (e.g., Lesser, 1974). Moreover, it has been argued that the laughter of ridicule serves as a powerful corrective of inappropriate or unwanted behavior (Bergson, 1914/1911). An appealing corrective would seem to be an irresistible pedagogical aid. However, a closer examination of the typical use of ridicule in tele-education, with complementary consid-

eration of the limited capacities of the preschool viewer, seem to suggest that ridicule as corrective may not be all that appropriate.

The social-learning paradigm is the model most frequently applied to learning from the visual media (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Murray, Rubinstein, & Comstock, 1972; Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973). This model of observational learning is typically divided into three stages: exposure, acquisition, and performance (e.g., Murray et al, p. 5). Examining the latter stages of the process, it is frequently assumed that a child must have a certain degree of empathetic ability (e.g., Deutsch & Madle, 1975) and/or role-taking skill (e.g., Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvin, 1968) in order to acquire and reproduce the actions of a model. Recent research using nonverbal measures (e.g., Borke, 1971, 1978; Henke, 1980) and age-appropriate verbal measures (e.g., Deutsch, 1974) seems to indicate that by the time children are 4-years old they can readily acquire and imitate simple, unambiguous behavior, even when it is presented or performed by a televised model.

The use of ridicule as corrective should be examined in the context of learning- and social-learning theory (e.g., Bandura, 1969, 1971) prior to critiquing its appropriateness for a youthful audience: At least among adults, being laughed at or ridiculed is widely assumed to constitute a noxious state. "For much as men love to laugh, they fear, they hate far more to be laughed at" (Kallen, 1966, p. 190). In learning-theoretic terms, being an object of ridicule is a form of "punishment," and the derisive laughter of others constitutes a punisher. Moreover, the jokingly-presented insult may well be punishing in its own right--a double dose of punishment. In order to avoid further aversion, the ridiculed person should avoid the behavior that evoked the punishment, thereby "learning" appropriate

behavior. According to the informational function of social-learning theory, witnessing a model punished by ridicule should lower the likelihood that the punished act will be performed by the observer. Essentially, the observer (learner) becomes apprehensive about the possibility of personal ridicule for the performance of the ridiculed act and resorts to alternative, "safer" responses.

Since ridicule as corrective "fits" the social-learning model, the next question is, "Does the use of ridicule in children's educational television fit within the parameters of 'simple, unambiguous behavior' that young children are likely to learn from television?" The typical incident of ridicule in children's tele-education consists of an act of inappropriate behavior performed by one character, followed by an insult dressed up in "jokework" (Freud, 1960/1905) from a second character, either an authority figure or a peer. This jocular insult is accompanied by or followed immediately by harsh laughter. Less frequently, clearly derisive laughter from a second character in response to inappropriate conduct occurs without an insult and jokework (Bryant et al, 1979). Moreover, the socially or educationally correct form of behavior is seldom demonstrated or even identified. It would appear that ridicule is anything but simple, unambiguous behavior, and it is doubtful that the cognitively immature child can comprehend its meaning or significance.

Consider the insult aspects of ridicule. Although most preschoolers are clearly at the age of "expiatory punishment" (Piaget, 1948, pp. 219-227) and frequently advocate extremely harsh punishment for transgressions (Johnson, 1962), most of the punishment that they consider appropriate for media wrong-doers is strictly physical (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Moreover, although preschoolers may begin

to recognize frequently presented jokework formats as "humor," such as the perenially popular "knock, knock" genre, insults and other verbal hostilities rarely occur in their humor repertoire, at least until they reach school age (Bryant & Meyer, 1977). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the punishing aspects of laughter do not appear to be a regular part of preschool children's social uses of laughter (cf. Chapman, 1976). In fact, 4-year olds appear to be only beginning to learn the differences in laughing with and laughing at. In short, ridicule does not seem to be a particularly appropriate corrective for preschool children, especially when used in educational television programs, where learning depends on observation, and where there are no readily available opportunities for clarification and feedback.

In order to test the effectiveness of ridicule as a corrective in children's educational television programs, highly arbitrary activities involving a novel object were presented to 4- and 6-year old children via videotaped demonstrations. Certain of the activities that were demonstrated were discouraged, encouraged or unmotivated in each of three videotapes, which were varied according to the type of message (ridicule, command, suggestion) used to provide the motivation. The use of command was included as a strong type of motivational message with which most 4-year olds are familiar. The suggestion condition was included as another, milder, type of message considered to be more appropriate (at least more familiar) to 6-year olds than to 4-year olds. Subject gender was an additional factor, because of the frequently found maturational differences between sexes.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-nine 4-year olds ($\bar{x}$ mos=52.1, SD=1.1; 37 M, 32F) and 83 6-year olds ($\bar{x}$ mos=79.8, SD=1.3; 42 M, 41F) participated as subjects. The 4-year olds were enrolled in one of five preschool programs in Amherst, Massachusetts. The 6-year olds were students in one of four public school kindergartens or first grades in the same town. The children's parents had been contacted by letter (cosigned by a principal or head teacher) concerning the experiment. If they were willing to let their child or their children participate, the parents signed and returned an informed consent statement. Parental permission was received from 84% of the younger children and 87% of the older children.

Experimental Materials

Inaminate object. Three almost identical, nonutilitarian objects were created. Each was formed by molding a 3' piece of hollow, bright orange, 3/4" plastic tubing into an intertwined mass which ranged in diameter from 6" - 9". Several noiseless objects (e.g., bristles from small hair curlers) were inserted into the tubing prior to heat forming to make the objects more interesting. The resultant objects were totally unfamiliar to the children. A single 4" replica of the objects was produced for use by puppets in a videotaped presentation.

Instructional material. A 2-minute audio-visual segment was created in which a child puppet, of indeterminable gender, demonstrated three "uses" of the object and was shown to play with it in each of the three ways. In the first 30 seconds of the segment, the puppet stated that the object was to be played with by one person at a time and was not to be thrown or rolled. The puppet then explained

and demonstrated how the object was to be held: (a) between the knees, (b) between the forearms, or (c) behind the neck by both hands. During the next 1 1/2-minute segment, the puppet was shown holding the object in each position three times, each time reacting euphorically to the experience. The first portion of the tape was primarily instructional; the second portion was designed to enhance the appeal of the object and was similar to many toy commercials directed to children.

Manipulation in type of message. The remaining 2-minute segment was produced in three versions, with all action identical except for the motivational treatment. During this portion of the material, an adult puppet, also of indeterminable gender, entered and was shown interacting with the child puppet who continued to play with the object as demonstrated, repeating each action twice. In each version, the young character was (a) discouraged from holding the object between the knees both times that this action is initiated, (b) encouraged to hold the object between the forearms on two occasions, and (c) neither discouraged or encouraged/from (unmotivated) holding the object behind the neck with both hands. The determination of which position was to be encouraged, discouraged, or unmotivated was made following a random procedure.

In the ridicule condition, (a) the adult puppet discouraged the younger puppet both times the object was held between the knees. On the first occasion, jeering laughter was accompanied by the statement "Goofy goose holds thing goofy!" as a form of childish ridicule. The second time the object was held between the knees, the adult's "Yucko, you're holding it mucho stupido." was accompanied by peels of derisive laughter. (b) For the encouraged behavior, the "correct" action was first performed by the child puppet immediately after the adult said

with mocking laughter, "Even a moose-goose holds it right!" In the second incident of ridicule for encouragement, the adult puppet said, "You'd forget how to hold an orange orangutan!", and laughed jeeringly until the object was placed between the forearms. (c) For the unmotivated action, on two occasions the child puppet was shown holding the object behind the neck with both hands. No ridicule accompanied or preceded this action.

In the command condition, (a) immediately following the two discouraged actions, the adult puppet commanded the younger to stop: "Don't do that!" and "I told you before, 'Stop that'!" (b) For the encouraged action, the adult puppet told the child, "Do it the right way!" and "Hold that thing right!" The appropriate action followed each command immediately.

In the suggestion version, (a) discouragment was delivered by the statements: "I don't think you should do that." and "That doesn't seem to be the right way." (b) Encouragement came in the form of "I'll bet you know how to hold that." and "You can remember the right way to hold it."

Combination of materials. Each manipulated segment was edited to immediately follow the 2-minute common instructional segment. The three 4-minute segments were transferred onto separate videocassettes.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in the children's normal preschool or school environment. In each preschool or school, two female and one male graduate students, who would serve as experimenters, attended at least 2 hours of sessions on the 2 consecutive school days prior to the day the experiment was to be conducted. On the second day, after having established rapport with the children, each of the experimenters took small groups of children to physically separated viewing areas and

showed them two cartoons and two instructional segments. Then they returned to the general room for play and snacks or to participate in the normal instructional routine.

On the day of the study, each experimenter selected a group of students according to predetermined random assignment and, following a common procedure, simultaneously took their groups (average n=6, range=4-8) to separate viewing areas. Each group then saw four short videotaped segments on a 19" color television monitor. The first, second and fourth segments were identical across conditions and were, respectively: a 44 second segment from Sesame Street, a 2-minute excerpt from an Inside Out instructional program, and a 33-second segment from a Mr. Magoo cartoon. The third segment shown was one version of the 4-minute experimental materials. Total viewing time in all conditions was 7 minutes 17 seconds. During this time, and for an additional 45 minutes the students who had not been granted permission to participate in the study had been taken outside or to another building by an aide or by a fourth graduate student. Following viewing, the subjects were returned to their general area and were told by their teacher that they could have free activities for a time while the teacher and his or her guests planned later activities.

During the viewing session, the three experimental objects had been placed on a table with other play/free-time objects. For the next 45 minutes, the experimenters and the teacher or an aide unobtrusively monitored play with the objects and recorded each incident of such play. Following the free play session, the experimenters worked or played with the children for a few minutes longer. Then the teacher and the experimenters talked briefly to the students about why the guests had been there. The experimenters gave a small party for all of the students in the class, subjects and others, before departing. Parents

were debriefed by letter or by article in parent newsletters and were given opportunities to view the materials and discuss the results.

Dependent Measures

Each experimenter coded play with one of the three objects. With the teacher or aide identifying children as needed, each incident of discouraged, encouraged, unmotivated or other play with the objects was recorded and assigned to a particular subject. The primary data were the frequency of discouraged, encouraged, or unmotivated play of each child with any of the three objects.

In one of the preschools and one of the elementary schools, a fourth experimenter independently coded play with each object, coding play with object #1 for 15 minutes, play with object #2 for the next 15 minutes, and play with the final object for the last 15 minutes. Comparisons of percent agreement between pairs of coders provided a reliability estimate for each experimenter. At the preschool, 100% agreement was reached for all pairs of coders. At the elementary school, agreement between pairs of coders was 96%, 100% and 95%, with one disagreement each between the two pairs who disagreed. The coding was therefore considered to be extremely reliable.

Results

Televised Instruction and Social Learning

The televised stimulus material (instructional plus "commercial") was highly effective in stimulating the children's interest in playing with the experimental object and in imitating the puppet model's behavior rather exactly. The subjects held one of the objects in one of the demonstrated positions over six times per person ($\bar{X}$=6.33; discouraged, $\bar{X}$=1.39; encouraged, $\bar{X}$=2.93; unmotivated, $\bar{X}$=2.01); while they seldom brought the object to rest on their bodies in any other position ($\bar{X}$=.37). A single-factor repeated-measures analysis of variance asses-

sing differences in type of position was highly significant ($F(3,605)=11.03$, conservatively corrected, $p<.001$). Subsequent analysis by Newman-Keuls' method revealed that all adjacent means were differentiated at $p<.05$. The children obviously learned how to perform the demonstrated actions on the novel object. Moreover, the motivational treatments combined were effective in altering the subjects' behavior as desired.

Effects of Message Type, Age, and Sex

Unequal-n analyses of variance, method of unweighted means, were performed on the data for discouraged action, encouraged action, and unmotivated action. In all of these analyses, no main effect for sex or any sex-related interaction approached significance (all F's<1). Therefore, the effects of gender were obviously negligible and will receive no further attention.

The effects of message type and age were most pronounced when specific action was discouraged. Although the main effect for message type failed to reach an acceptable level of significance ($F(2,140)=2.71$, $p<.10$; $\bar{X}$'s: ridicule=1.20, command=1.30, suggestion=1.69), as did the main effect for age ($F(1,140)=1.20$, $p<.10$; X's; 4-year olds=1.51, 6-year olds=1.30), a robust interaction between these two factors was found, with $F(2,140)=13.21$, $p<.001$. As can be seen from the means displayed in the upper portion of Table 1, for 4-year olds, direct commands were a more effective deterrent to unwanted behavior than

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Insert Table 1 about here

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either ridicule or suggestions. In contrast, for 6-year olds, ridicule was by far the most effective deterrent, yielding less than half of the unwanted behavior as did suggestions, the next most effective deterrent for this age group. Directly antithetical to the behavior

of 4-year olds, direct commands were the least effective means of extinguishing unwanted behavior in 6-year old subjects.

For encouraged behavior, main effects were again insignificant, with message type yielding $F(2,140)=2.00$, $p>.10$, $\bar{X}$'s: ridicule=3.33, command=2.62, suggestion=2.84; and with age yielding $F(1,140)=1.64$, $p>.10$, $\bar{X}$'s: 4-year olds=2.74, 6-year olds=3.10. The interaction between message type and age was significant ($F(2,140)=3.58$, $p<.05$), with means displayed in Table 1. For 4-year olds, the direct command was the most effective motivator to action. For 6-year olds, ridicule was the most potent message type, followed by suggestion. As with discouraged behavior, the 6-year olds responded least well to direct commands, in striking contrast to the 4-year olds.

An examination of the results of the analysis of variance on unmotivated behavior indicates that the potent motivational effects of ridicule, for the older children, and direct command, for the younger, were highly specific to the appropriate behavior: The main effect for message type and all associated interactions were negligible (all $F's<1$). The main effect for age was also insignificant ($F(1.140)=1.17$, $p>.10$) with means of 2.14 for the 4-year olds and 1.90 for the 6-year olds. This indicates that 4-year olds clearly learned this type of demonstrated behavior as well as the 6-year olds. When message type is combined, 6-year olds were slightly, but insignificantly, more responsive to both encouraged and discouraged behavior.

Discussion

The results of the present investigation clearly indicate that, although ridiculing an instructional model is a potent means of educating 6-year old television viewers, it is far less satisfactory in motivating 4-year olds to action or in deterring their unwanted performances. For 6-year olds, watching a model undergo the shame of

ridicule was a significantly more effective means of both discouraging unwanted behavior and encouraging desired action than was either other mode of correction employed. Six-year olds, having interacted extensively in nursery school and in kindergarten, as well as in informal play, are apparently adequately socialized to recognize and appreciate the punishing power of derisive laughter. In contrast, indirect ridicule seems largely wasted on 4-year olds. It may be that young children lack the cognitive capacity to untangle the complexities of the ambiguous act of ridicule itself, or they may lack the experience to recognize derision for what it is, or they may be unable to vicariously experience the dysphoria that the model purportedly feels because of the punishment of ridicule. Whatever the limiting factors are, it seems that numerous producers of educational television have erred if they have assumed that ridiculing Kermit's, or Bert's, or another character's errant actions provides an effective lesson for the preschool viewer.

Since 4-year olds responded so appropriately and vigorously to the model's response to direct commands, and since they performed the "unmotivated" behavior (insignificantly) better than the 6-year olds, it would seem that they have developed the required empathetic or role-taking skills to learn the simple lessons that were presented in how to "use" the unfamiliar object. It therefore seems that whatever corrective potency ridicule lacks for preschool children comes either from experiential unfamiliarity with the effects of ridicule or from cognitive inabilities to untangle this type of complex and potentially ambiguous message. The present design offers no heuristic clarification along these lines, so additional research is required to determine just <u>why</u> indirect ridicule does not seem to work with preschoolers.

It is also noteworthy that 6-year olds responded so well to suggestions and so poorly to commands. Perhaps they were so habituated to or "fed up" with the mands of early childhood that they either ignored or rebelled against this type of message, preferring the more "adult" suggestion as a mode of interacting more appropriate to their maturity.

Up to this point, the present considerations of ridicule as a corrective have ignored any potentially dysfunctional aspects of this type of motivational message. It should be noted that numerous educators have emphasized detrimental aspects of ridicule, and, in fact, have urged that it has no place in education. It has, for example, been claimed that ridicule harms its victims psychologically (e.g., Highet, 1963/1950), undermines teacher-student rapport (e.g., Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971), and destroys an effective learning environment (e.g., Sanacore, 1975). At present, there is little or no convincing evidence that ridicule does harm the learner or undermine the educational process. However, since its use seems of little motivational consequence to preschoolers, who may well misinterpret it, and since other forms of humor or other audio-visual devices can attract or maintain the young viewer's attention equally well, there appears to be little justification for its high level of current use in children's educational television. After all, rather than motivating youngsters to learn, it may be teaching them that ridiculing others is the way to behave.

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Table 1

Mean Frequencies with which 4- and 6-Year Olds Imitated Discouraged, Encouraged, or Unmotivated Televised Instruction following Ridicule, Command, or Suggestion

Type of behavior	Age	Type of message		
		Ridicule	Command	Suggestion
Discouraged	4	1.83^{c}	$.70^{a}$	2.00^{c}
	6	$.68^{a}$	1.81^{c}	1.43^{b}
Encouraged	4	2.70^{b}	2.91^{c}	2.61^{b}
	6	3.86^{d}	2.37^{a}	3.04^{c}
Unmotivated	4	2.17	2.04	2.22
	6	2.04	1.85	1.82

Note. Comparisons are within categories of type of behavior only. Means having different superscripts differ significantly at $p<.05$ by Newman-Keuls' test.